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SUBJECT: SENEGAL: A NEW CYCLE OF VIOLENCE IN UNIVERSITIES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Senegal's university students have begun using violent protests again to put pressure on President Abdoulaye Wade. Regular confrontations between the police and university students are reminiscent of the late '80s when the country was undergoing a profound malaise and desperate youth turned to violence to express dissatisfaction with the country's governance. Crowded lecture halls, poor living conditions, understaffed and under-funded institutions of higher learning, and a shrinking job market are causes of anxiety for university students. If the GOS fails to respond with innovative solutions, the higher education crisis may create more violence and instability. END SUMMARY.

Failed Institutions -----

¶2. (SBU) Senegal's institutions of higher education suffer from overcrowding and an obsolete approach to education that values theory and scholarship over the practical demands of the job market. Senegal's universities suffer from a lack of resources and everyone - faculty, administration, and students - is pressing for more, but with Senegal's budget already stretched, it is difficult to see from where the money will come.

Violent Communication -----

¶3. (SBU) Students, who live eight to a very small dormitory room, have refused to accept an increase of fees from the current ten dollars per student to fifty dollars for undergraduates and seventy for postgraduates. But some students have come to the conclusion that the only way to get academic and political authorities to pay attention to their demands is by resorting to the language of civil disobedience and even violence. On February 8, after a 24-day strike, students at the University of Thies stopped all traffic and burned tires on the busy road between Thies and Dakar.

¶4. (SBU) Similarly, on February 18, students of the Regional University of Bambey also held up traffic for three hours on the road between Dakar and the holy city of Touba. They protested against the lack of professors and threw rocks at security forces, which led to the arrest of 14 students who were prosecuted three days later, of which six received a suspended sentence of three months imprisonment.

¶5. (SBU) Law faculty students of Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar, after a three-week strike organized an "intifada," their leader, Cheikh Samb, told the Embassy, "I launched coordinated attacks on security forces in three different locations, knowing that they would not be able to respond efficiently. At one point, we outflanked them on the main campus and they had to flee, leaving behind three anti-riot shields. I negotiated with the police: they freed my students they had arrested and we gave them back their shields." This student leader who is completing a master's in law declared that he ignores rumors that he will be arrested soon. In any case, he claimed that if he is arrested, the whole university

will riot. On February 21, students of the teacher training college of Dakar and of the faculty of economics and conducted their own riots, blocked traffic, and burned tires.

General Complacency

¶6. (SBU) Students unanimously say that academic authorities do not listen when they draw their attention to problems. Administrators pretend to manage but lack authority and funding and often place greater priority on their personal agendas, including job security, perks, and personal use of expensive government resources. Students told the Embassy the rectors of the country's two main universities are both active members of the ruling party and, as a result, have little time to devote to their institutions. Professor Bouba Diop, Ombudsman of the University of Dakar that has some sixty thousand students, over one thousand faculty and displays the main problems in Senegalese higher education, deplored the lack of disciplinary power of academic authorities over their peers. In testimony to the impotence of academic officials, the disputes between the students and the administration end up in the in-box of President Wade.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Senegal's higher education system has deteriorated significantly and, as one student put it, "is headed to the precipice." Senegalese authorities have so far chosen to try to add more resources while avoiding the implementation of unpopular measures - such as competitive entrance exams and tuition - needed to make the system sustainable. This policy that sacrifices accountability for the sake of stability has begun to show its limits. The current university crisis is a symptom of a larger societal malaise. Young people have no prospects and no trust in their rulers. Their fear of the future and their negative perception that the ruling political elites and academic decision-makers has begun to produce violent reactions.

¶8. (SBU) In some cases the perception of hopelessness has lead them to seek refuge in religion, practiced in an ostentatious way on campus to defy the principle of secularism that is at the heart of the French university system Senegal inherited. Signs of intolerance have been noted by the ombudsman who deplored that some students complain that there are "too many foreigners" in Dakar University, while ethnic and religious brotherhood networks as forms of solidarity are on the rise.

SMITH